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News Release

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NEW CAVIAR IMPORT MEASURES PROTECT IMPERILED STURGEON

Sturgeon, an ancient fish predating dinosaurs but now in peril due to over-harvesting to support a rampant international illegal market in caviar, got some good news today. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced new regulations designed to curtail this devastating illegal trade and protect remaining sturgeon populations.

"Sturgeon are living fossils," said Service Director Jamie Rappaport Clark during an event held at the Aquarium for Wildlife Conservation in New York announcing the action. "These magnificent fish survived the catastrophe that wiped out the dinosaurs and most of the other species existing 65 million years ago. But in the space of one century, we may do what nature could not--drive this fish to extinction."

The new measures are the main thrust of an international effort to protect wild populations of sturgeon, especially Caspian Sea species reputed to produce the world's finest caviar. Nearly a year ago, the United States and the 142 other countries belonging to the Convention on International Trade In Endangered Species (CITES), a treaty that protects globally traded animals and plants from over-exploitation, initiated action to halt this precipitous decline.

The United States, both an importer and a sturgeon range country, accounts for about 30 percent of the world caviar market. Most of the caviar sold in the U.S. is imported, with 70 percent of the total amount imported coming from Russia. The U.S. and Germany, two of the leading caviar-consuming countries, spearheaded the proposal to give wild sturgeon protection under CITES. Unanimously accepted, the governments placed all species of sturgeon that were not previously listed on the treaty's Appendix II, a listing that sets in motion trade controls through a system of permits.

These new measures will be effective April 1, 1998. On that date, all caviar imported into the United States must have valid CITES export permits from the country of origin. In addition, all caviar exported from this country must be accompanied by

CITES export permits. The United States has a small but growing domestic caviar production industry using native white sturgeons, paddlefish, and other species. When countries issue CITES export permits, they guarantee that the caviar contained in the shipment has been legally acquired and is not detrimental to the survival of wild sturgeon.

"The eggs from Caspian Sea sturgeon feed the multimillion-dollar caviar industry. The Service believes that more than 50 percent of that trade is illegal," Clark said. Unsettled economic conditions in the countries surrounding the Caspian Sea have contributed to this flourishing illegal trade as well-financed illegal operators pay local people to over-harvest the fish.

"The Service is determined to do its part to put these criminal elements out of business. The Service's Division of Law Enforcement will see to it that illegal shipments do not enter or leave this country," Clark said. All imports of caviar will be examined by Service wildlife inspectors who will make certain that CITES permits are valid. This means that the type of caviar in the shipment must be from the same species listed on the permit. If the shipment does not match, then it will be declared illegal and seized.

In addition, biologists at the Service's state-of-the-art forensics laboratory in Oregon will assist in this effort. They have developed a method of DNA analysis to identify which species of sturgeon produced the caviar being tested.

When a shipment enters a U.S. port, Service wildlife inspectors may remove a small amount of caviar and send it to the forensics laboratory for analysis. Because caviar is extremely perishable, the Service will expedite this procedure. If the sample is found to be illegal or not match the stated species, the shipment will be seized and the importer prosecuted for violating Federal wildlife laws.

To help other countries and organizations cooperating in this global effort to save sturgeons, the Service plans to offer, at no cost via the internet and other means, the techniques necessary to identify caviar by DNA analysis. "As far as the Service is concerned, when it comes to saving our wildlife species, the information highway is toll-free and a valuable tool for international wildlife conservation," said Clark.

The DNA analysis will also benefit American caviar consumers. Illegal caviar reaching the marketplace is labeled as containing the finest quality eggs. However, it is often an adulterated mix of inferior quality roe. This DNA analysis will help ensure that the quality of caviar consumers are paying for is what they are actually getting and is from legal harvests

Finally, the new CITES listing allows each individual planning to carry caviar into or out of the United States to possess an amount not to exceed 250 grams (about 1/2 pound) per trip without a permit. If a person is found in violation of the law, Service wildlife inspectors will seize the items. The individual could also be subject to a fine.

"American caviar consumers can help us in these efforts," said Clark. "If we don't save the sturgeon now, there won't be any caviar for future generations to enjoy."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the Federal agency having primary responsibility for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service's 94 million acres include 512 national wildlife refuges, 65 national fish hatcheries, 38 wetland management districts with waterfowl production areas, 78 ecological services field stations, and 50 wildlife coordination areas.

The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, administers the Endangered Species Act, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes Federal excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state wildlife agencies. This program is a cornerstone of the Nation's wildlife management efforts, funding fish and wildlife restoration, boating access, hunter education, shooting ranges, and related projects across America.



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DID YOU KNOW?

- o Sturgeon are "living fossils" that evolved 250 million years ago and survived the disappearance of the dinosaurs.
- o Most sturgeon are anadromous fish, hatching in fresh water, maturing in brackish or salt water, and returning to their natal freshwater streams to spawn. They live in brackish or salt water between spawnings.
- o Sturgeon have been harvested for their eggs, called "roe" and processed as "caviar," for centuries.
- o In the 19th Century, the United States led the world in caviar production, including 60,000 pounds each year from Lake Michigan.
- o During the peak of the U.S. sturgeon fishery (1885-1895), an estimated 25 million pounds of sturgeon were harvested annually from U.S. waters.
- o By 1910, sturgeon in the United States were nearly extinct due to over-fishing, poaching, and habitat degradation. U.S. production ended and caviar production shifted to the Caspian Sea.
- o Today, Caspian Sea sturgeons account for more than 90 percent of the world's caviar.
- o With an area of 238,000 square miles and maximum depth of 3,215 feet, the Caspian Sea is the largest inland body of water in the world. It is bordered by (clockwise from the north) Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Azerbaijan, and Russia.
- o The most commercially desirable caviars--beluga, osetra, and sevruga--are increasingly rare as the beluga, Russian, and stellate sturgeons become threatened with extinction due primarily to the substantial and growing illegal trade.
- o The number of adult sturgeons living in the Caspian Sea is estimated to have declined by 70 percent from 142 million adults in 1978 to 43.5 million in 1994.
- o International law enforcement agencies report that illegal wildlife trade is second only to the illegal drug trade in volume and profit, the total trade in caviar is estimated at around \$125 million, and more than 50 percent of the trade is illegal.

- o The United States accounts for about 30 percent of the world caviar market. According to the National Marine Fisheries Service, the U.S. imported 61 tons of caviar in 1994, 54 tons in 1995, 81 tons in 1996. Russia supplies the U.S. with 70 percent of all its caviar imports.
- o According to U.S. Customs declarations, recent U.S. caviar imports were valued at \$60 million, sold at an average price of \$50 an ounce.
- o In the United States, caviar is sold commercially at prices ranging from \$25 an ounce for sturgeon of Tennessee waterways to \$80 an ounce for Russian beluga.
- o However, caviar in the illegal trade may be repacked and falsely labeled, thus containing an inferior product for which the consumer still pays top dollar.
- o The threat to sturgeon is exacerbated by poachers' methods for harvesting roe. While fishing for egg-carrying females, poachers simply kill all the fish they catch, including males and juveniles. There is no easy, inexpensive way to extract the eggs without killing the fish.
- o Because they are long-lived (up to 150 years), sturgeon reach sexual maturity late--between 6 and 25 years, depending on species and gender. Therefore, indiscriminate killing is a serious threat to the species' survival.
- o Of the nine species of sturgeon native to the U.S., four are listed as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act:
 - Shortnosed sturgeon (*Acipenser brevirostrum*) (E)
 - Pallid sturgeon (*Scaphirhynchus albus*) (E)
 - White sturgeon (*A. transmontanus*), Kootenai River population (E)
 - Gulf sturgeon (*A. oxyrhynchus desotoi*) (T)
- o Atlantic sturgeon may live up to 60 years, weigh up to 800 pounds, and reach lengths of up to 15 feet. A 200-300-pound female Atlantic sturgeon may carry up to 30 or 40 pounds of eggs.
- o In addition to caviar, sturgeon provide meat; leather for bookbinding and handicrafts; and isinglass (a gelatin made from the swim bladder) used in beer clarification, waterproofing materials, jellies, paint toners, and glues.